

1.95  
Sul  
Tenn.  
Fentress Co.  
Reserve

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
The Farm Security Administration  
and  
The Bureau of Agricultural Economics  
Cooperating

---

SURVEY OF AGRICULTURAL LABOR CONDITIONS IN FENTRESS COUNTY, TENNESSEE

---

Tom Vasey, Farm Security Administration  
and  
Josiah C. Folsom, Bureau of Agricultural Economics

---

Washington, D. C.  
November 1937

USDA  
LIB

This publication is one of a series of 11 with similar titles by Tom Vasey and Josiah C. Folsom. The reports are based on surveys made in the late summer and early autumn of 1936 of the economic and social conditions of adult agricultural laborers. The counties studied represent various types of farming in different parts of the United States, as follows:

<u>State</u>	<u>County</u>	<u>Type of Farming</u>
California	Placer	Fruit
Colorado	Archuleta	Stock-ranch
Illinois	Livingston	Corn
Iowa	Hamilton	Corn-Hog
Kansas	Pawnee	Winter wheat
Kentucky	Todd	Tobacco
Louisiana	Concordia Parish	Cotton (eastern)
Minnesota	Lac qui Parle	Small grain
Pennsylvania	Wayne	Dairy
Tennessee	Fentress	Self-sufficing
Texas	Karnes	Cotton (western)



## SURVEY OF AGRICULTURAL LABOR CONDITIONS IN FENTRESS COUNTY, TENNESSEE

By Tom Vasey, Farm Security Administration  
and  
Josiah C. Folsom, Bureau of Agricultural Economics

During the summer and fall of 1936, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the Social Research Section of the Farm Security Administration /1 conducted a series of studies relative to agricultural labor conditions existing in the United States today. Funds for this purpose were provided by the Works Progress Administration. Eleven counties in as many States were selected as representative areas for intensive research; Fentress County, Tennessee, was included in the list by reason of the self-sufficing farms which characterize its agriculture.

Enumerators were engaged to canvass the hired farm laborers and their farm-operator employers, and schedules were used to record the data secured from each of these groups. The laborers were interviewed somewhat at length, not only concerning such general characteristics as age, sex, education, etc., but also with regard to incomes for the previous year, job descriptions, wage rates, work histories for the preceding 12 months, and participation in community affairs. The farm operators in their turn were questioned as to wage rates, fluctuations in numbers of employees, and methods of securing labor. /2

The enumerators were instructed to contact, as nearly as possible, all farms in the county except those not primarily dependent upon agriculture. The exceptions included country estates, livestock dealers, institutions, feed lots, boarding and lodging places, and unclassified farms. As far as the laborers were concerned, "only those hired to do the work of adults at adult wages" were interviewed. This policy eliminated all unpaid family and child labor.

The tableland of the Cumberland Plateau bisects Fentress County in a north-south direction. To the west, farming is largely of the self-sufficing type; in the eastern half, some reliance is placed on potatoes and livestock for a cash income, although even here self-sufficing farms prevail. For the county as a whole, lumbering is more

---

/1 The Resettlement Administration, prior to September 1, 1937.

/2 The work was directed by representatives of the Department of Agriculture. The officials of the Experiment Station and of the University of Tennessee advised concerning the study and cooperated in obtaining the enumerators, Frank M. Fitzgerald of Knoxville, and Selmer Neskaug of Deer Lodge.



important than agriculture, but frequently the two enterprises are combined, the same employee performing first one kind of work and then the other. Many of the farmers do not require extra labor and the others hire rather intermittently. Consequently, in order to obtain an adequate sample for this study, it was necessary to interview in addition to laborers actually at work some who were not employed on farms at the time but who had very recently had such jobs. The period of the survey did not greatly affect the sample since seasonal labor demands are never heavy and since transient labor is not usual in the area.

Only a few of the 1,488 farms enumerated in the Agricultural Census of 1935 required hired help. In the 4 weeks of the study extending from August 28 to September 26, 1936, 60 farmers hiring a total of 88 laborers were contacted. Interviews with workers who had been recently employed in agriculture raised the total of laborers from whom schedules were obtained to 162.

### General Characteristics

Since no Negroes live in Fentress County, all of the workers were white. All except 4 of them were men. Undoubtedly many women do farm work, but for the most part they work only on their home places and receive no pay for their services. Although one man who was 80 years old was found working out for wages, three-fourths of the laborers were under 40 and nearly one-half were less than 30 years of age (Table 1). Changing educational opportunities are clearly shown by the inverse relation of age and grades of schooling completed. Among the older workers, individuals were frequently found who could neither read nor write. At the present time, however, a certain amount of schooling is available to nearly everyone in the county and the younger workers generally report having taken some advantage of it.

More than one-half of the laborers interviewed were married and very few were widowed or separated. As would be expected, the younger workers usually belonged to the unmarried group (Table 2). Practically none of the unmarried laborers had dependents but nearly all of those who were married reported one dependent or more. The family most frequently found included 4 persons, the head and 3 dependents, but because of a number of large families the average size was 4.7. One family reported 13 members (Table 3).

With one exception, all these wage earners were born in Tennessee or in Kentucky, the border of which lies only a few miles north of this area. Although one or two had recently moved from the Norris Dam locality, all the workers claimed present residence in Fentress County. Lack of mobility in the group was evident, for no one had recently sought work outside the county.



Table 1.- Age and education of 162 agricultural laborers,  
Fentress County, Tennessee, September 1936

Age in years	Total	Grades completed					Not reported
		0 - 4	5 - 7	8	9 and over		
14	1	-	-	1	-	-	
15	2	1	1	-	-	-	
16	10	3	3	4	-	-	
17	5	1	2	2	-	-	
18	9 <u>/1</u>	-	5	3	1	-	
19	9	2	4	3	-	-	
20 - 29	40 <u>/1</u>	16	16	7	1	-	
30 - 39	40 <u>/2</u>	18	16	4	2	-	
40 - 49	21	12	4	3	-	2	
50 - 59	14	4	7	-	-	3	
60 - 69	4	1	-	1	-	2	
70 - 79	6	6	-	-	-	-	
80 - 89	1	1	-	-	-	-	
Totals	162	65	58	28	4	7	

/1 One female included.

/2 Two females included.

Table 2.- Marital status of 162 agricultural laborers by age,  
Fentress County, Tennessee, September 1936

Marital status	Total	Age in years							
		10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89
Unmarried	68	35 <u>/1</u>	24	7	1	1	-	-	-
Married	90	1	15	32 <u>/2</u>	20	13	3	5	1
Widowed, separated, or divorced	4	-	1 <u>/1</u>	1	-	-	1	1	-
Totals	162	36	40	40	21	14	4	6	1

/1 One female included.

/2 Two females included.

Table 3.- Number of dependents of 162 agricultural laborers,  
Fentress County, Tennessee, September 1936

Number of dependents	Laborers	
	Number	Percent
0	70	43.2
1	12	7.4
2	7	4.3
3	15	9.3
4	13	8.0
5	10	6.2
6	13	8.0
7	9	5.6
8 and over	13	8.0
Totals	162	100.0



### Tenure Experience

A large part of the paid farm labor is composed of owners and tenants on small acreages who find time for supplementary work elsewhere. Slightly more than one-third of the laborers reported no experience as farm operators. One-fourth, or 43, had owned farms at one time, and only 11 had sold out. Twenty percent of the workers interviewed were still operating their own farms and another one-fifth were either renters or sharecroppers. Nevertheless, croppers become laborers and laborers become croppers less frequently in Fentress County than in other Southern areas. Termination of sharecropping usually marked a definite change in status; 5 had bought farms of their own, others had moved or had given up farm operation on account of ill health. No particular period of time was marked by a general shift of farmers from the operator group to that of laborers, the changes reported in the schedules having occurred throughout a series of years.

Table 4.- Previous farm operation experience of 161 agricultural laborers, Fentress County, Tennessee, September 1936

Experience	Laborers	
	Number	Percent
None	60 <u>/1</u>	37.3
Sharecropper	54	33.5
Tenant	1	.6
Cropper and tenant	3	1.9
Owner	15	9.3
Owner and cropper	24	14.9
Owner, tenant, and cropper	4	2.5
Totals	161	100.0

/1 Four females, all others males.

From year to year few changes have occurred in either tenure or occupational status. The persons who were working on the farms of Fentress County in September 1936 had generally been farm laborers a year earlier; 116, or 73 percent, reported themselves as farm laborers in August 1935, and 26 as farm operators or foremen. During this year, however, 75 of the 162 interviewed had been employed in some type of nonagricultural work, generally lumbering, mining, or construction. Practically all of these 75 workers had secured their supplementary employment in Fentress County, and none of them had gone outside the State for jobs of this nature.



### Income

Annual cash incomes of the hired farm laborers in this county are extremely low. But, since the money economy has not permeated this section as completely as other sections, means for satisfying many of the primary needs are produced at home or are obtained through exchange of services, or of services for goods. Frequently laborers were found who had worked off doctors' bills or grocery bills. In these instances cash income was reduced, but the need for cash was likewise reduced by a similar amount.

Half of the 158 workers who reported incomes received less than \$100 in cash from September 1, 1935, to August 31, 1936, and 3 out of every 10 earned less than \$50 (Table 5). A few relatively high incomes raised the average to \$125. Of the total earnings of all the laborers, 55 percent came from agricultural work, 12 percent from relief, and the remainder from nonagricultural pursuits. Children and other members of the family earned about 10 percent of the total amount. The largest proportion of their earnings came from nonagricultural work.

When relief funds were received, the cash income of the recipient tended to be above the average. Although persons receiving relief were scattered through all income groups, only one-third of them had incomes of less than \$100, whereas one-half of the total number interviewed had incomes below this amount. By the aid of work-relief jobs a few unmarried men without dependents added considerably to their incomes. One worker reported \$273, of which \$250 was from Works Progress Administration employment; another, with an income of \$225, attributed \$150 to work relief.

Twenty-two percent of the laborers with one or more dependents and 13 percent of those without dependents were on the relief rolls at some time during the year preceding the survey. A larger proportion of the workers with the greater number of dependents received relief, and there was a slight relation between the amount of relief received and the number of dependents.

The average number of days at wage labor during the year was 108, but the number of workers having nearly full time or having less than 30 days exceeded the number reporting the average amount (Table 6). More than one-third had less than 30 days in agricultural or mixed employment; 16 worked more than 270 days.



Table 5.- Total income, September 1935 - August 1936, of 158 agricultural workers, Fentress County, Tennessee

Total income	Agricultural earnings				Nonagricultural earnings				Relief				
	Number	Percent	By laborers	By dependents	Number	Percent	By laborers	By dependents	Number	Percent	By laborers	By dependents	
	: :	: :	Average: Number/1: Average: Number/1:	Average: Number/1: Average: Number/1:	: :	: :	Average: Number/1: Average: Number/1:	Average: Number/1: Average: Number/1:	: :	: :	Average: Number/1: Average: Number/1:	Average: Number/1: Average: Number/1:	
\$ 1 - 24	23	14.6	\$ 9.48	-	3	\$ 8.33	2	\$15.00	-	-	2	\$25.50	
25 - 49	25	15.8	26.16	1	\$ 6.00	9	17.00	1	1.00	1	\$30.00	1	24.00
50 - 74	16	10.1	47.67	5	12.60	1	77.00	1	25.00	3	13.00	-	-
75 - 99	17	10.8	51.65	5	6.80	8	44.63	3	34.00	1	19.00	2	25.50
100 - 149	21	13.3	71.67	2	27.50	9	63.56	3	39.00	4	35.75	1	70.00
150 - 199	22	13.9	106.82	5	21.20	7	88.00	7	22.71	5	82.40	2	1.50
200 - 249	12	7.6	148.17	4	12.75	6	63.50	2	60.00	4	73.50	-	-
250 - 299	9	5.7	136.56	4	13.75	5	150.00	2	27.50	2	170.00	-	-
300 - 349	5	3.2	56.80	3	12.00	5	250.00	1	12.00	-	-	-	-
350 - 399	2	1.3	200.00	2	45.00	2	94.50	1	41.00	1	39.00	-	-
400 and over	6	3.7	56.33	-	-	4	271.25	1	600.00	3	296.00	-	-
Totals and averages	158	100.0	65.92	31	16.00	59	92.46	24	52.58	24	91.83	8	24.88

/1 Number of laborers whose dependents reported earnings.

/2 As high as \$603.



Table 6.- Days worked in agriculture and in mixed employment  
by 130 farm laborers, Fentress County, Tennessee

Days worked	Agriculture		Mixed employment	
			Average in	Average in
	Number	Number	agricultural	nonagricultural
0 - 29	38	11	7	11
30 - 59	4	5	13	28
60 - 89	2	6	20	57
90 - 119	3	8	35	68
120 - 149	4	4	64	63
150 - 179	1	6	59	60
180 - 209	2	2	74	127
210 - 239	2	5	143	80
240 - 269	5	2	104	138
270 - 312	14	2	119	163
Totals	75	55	50	57

#### Assets

Assets as reported by this group were most commonly in the form of real estate. Forty of the 162 workers owned some farm land, 48 acres comprising the average holding; 2 reported nonfarm land, and 3 had their own homes in town. Although two-thirds did not live on the farms on which they worked, only 2 possessed automobiles. Bank accounts, listed in 3 cases, averaged \$35.70 each. Three workers carried life insurance at an average amount of \$1,167. More than half of those interviewed reported ownership of livestock, such as horses, pigs, or milk cows.

#### Wage Rates

Because of intermittent employment, rates of pay are based on short-time periods. Only 4 laborers and 7 operators reported monthly rates; 135 workers, or 86 percent, were paid by the day, 5 by the week, and 13 by the hour. The schedules of the operators and laborers showed two rates predominating, 75 cents and \$1 per day. These two rates cover more than four-fifths of those being paid by the day, and account for 70 percent of all the laborers irrespective of the basis of pay (Table 7).

Average wage rates per day in Fentress County, as revealed by the survey, did not vary greatly from those for the State of Tennessee as gathered by the United States Department of Agriculture in October 1936. The average farm wage rates per day for Tennessee were 80 cents



Table 7.- Wage rates paid and perquisites furnished agricultural laborers, Fentress County, Tennessee

Rate and method	Laborers' reports				Operators' reports <sup>/1</sup>			
	: With neither:				: Without:			
	Total	board nor house	With board	With house	Total	Without board	With board	With house
By hour:								
\$ .10	4	4	-	-				
.12	1	1	-	-				
.15	4	4	-	-				
.35	2	2	-	-				
.50	1	1	-	-				
.75	1	1	-	-				
Total	13	13	-	-				
Average	\$ .24	\$ .24						
By day:								
\$ .50	13	4	8	1	5	-	5	
.60	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	
.65	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	
.75	49	24	12	13	26	9	17	
.95	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	
1.00	61	46	8	7	25	7	18	
1.25	4	4	-	-	1	1	-	
1.50	1	-	-	1	3	2	1	
2.00	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	
3.00	3	3	-	-	-	-	-	
3.50	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	
Total	135	82	29	24	61	19	42	
Average	\$ .94	\$1.02	\$ .76	\$ .89	\$ .88	\$ .95	\$ .84	
By week:								
\$ 1.00	4	3	1	-				
4.00	1	-	-	1				
Total	5	3	1	1				
By month:								
\$ 5.00	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	
7.50	-	-	-	-	2	1	1	
10.00	3	-	3	-	3	2	1	
15.00	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	
25.00	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	
Total	4	-	4	-	7	3	4	
Grand total	157	98	34	25	68	22	46	

<sup>/1</sup> Rates by the hour, by the week, or with house were not requested from the operators.



with board and \$1 without board. In Fentress County farm operators contacted in this survey reported an average of 84 cents and 95 cents respectively, and farm laborers reported 76 cents and \$1.02. The small number reporting monthly rates of pay makes a comparison of monthly averages unreliable.

Although the majority of the laborers reported no perquisites, wages were occasionally supplemented in this way. Approximately one-fifth of the workers reporting day rates received noon meals, and 24 laborers were furnished houses. Relatively few received garden space, provisions from the farm, and other perquisites of a similar nature that are not infrequent elsewhere.

### Tenure of Employment

The fact that farm work in Fentress County is highly intermittent indicates that employment periods are usually short. Two-thirds of the jobs were obtained during the month the survey was conducted. One laborer was found working for one employer in the morning and for another in the afternoon. Less than 20 percent had been employed on the same job prior to the beginning of 1936. Even these figures are misleading inasmuch as many who worked intermittently for the same employer reported a length of time far greater than the actual number of days worked. Many farms employed no extra labor at any time. Those operators who did report extra labor specified varying lengths for the crop season but very few gave more than 4 weeks for harvest hands.

Almost without exception the method of placement consisted of direct contact between the employer and the prospective employee (Table 8). As a general rule, the operator sought the laborer more frequently than the laborer sought the job.

Table 8.- Method of placement of farm labor,  
Fentress County, Tennessee

Method	Laborers' reports		Operators' reports	
	Number	Percent /1	Number	Percent /2
Employers' search	105	65	48	81
Laborers' search	54	34	37	63
Other	2	1	1	2

/1 Percent of specified jobs secured by the given method.

/2 Percent of 59 employers reporting the use of a given method in 1936; since an operator may report more than one method this column does not necessarily total 100 percent.



### Community Participation

The farm laborers of Fentress County held practically no memberships in various labor or farm organizations. One wage hand had previously been a member of a nonagricultural labor union, but none reported membership in farm labor unions or farmers' cooperative associations.

Social participation in the community is indicated by Table 9. Hospitality and intra-community relationships are shown by the high percentage that had made overnight visits among friends or relatives in the past 12 months. Religious services with rather frequent attendance ranked first among the social contacts secured through larger groups. The majority of these rural inhabitants go to church regularly, although services may not be held oftener than once a month. The young unmarried men attend much more frequently than their elders, probably for social reasons.

Table 9.- Community participation of 162 agricultural laborers,  
Fentress County, Tennessee

Activity	: : Number : reporting	: : Percent : reporting	: Average : times : reported
Overnight visits	146	90.1	3.9
Religious meetings	132	81.5	24.6
Shopping	129	79.6	22.5
Court day	46	28.4	3.1
Overnight hunting or fishing trips	44	27.2	10.2
Community entertainments	40	24.7	56.5
Movies	28	17.3	5.6
Farmers' institutes	25	15.4	2.6
Ball games	23	14.2	6.3
Circuses	18	11.1	2.1
Farm practice demonstrations	8	4.9	2.1

Most of those reporting went to a store for shopping once a month or oftener; but only those living in or near Jamestown, the one town of any size in the county, reported attendance at court or at entertainments such as community affairs, movies, or circuses. Court, which is held every 3 months in Fentress County as in many other counties in the South, is a focal point for a variety of community gatherings as well as for judicial business. Only one-fourth of the group interviewed had attended during the year, however, evidencing either a widespread lack of interest or adequate transportation facilities.



The rather large number of workers who had attended farmers' institutes during the previous 12 months was due to the proximity of the York Institute, a school for mountain farmers. Most of these were farm operators as well as laborers. The few who had observed farm-practice demonstrations had done so at meetings held for the purpose of organizing potato associations or of obtaining information about soil conservation and governmental lending agencies.

In Fentress County most of the agricultural labor is performed by farm operators working out for wages or by laborers drawn from the lumbering industry. Cash incomes are low, but this fact in itself does not necessarily indicate an extremely low plane of living. Agricultural employment is intermittent and cannot be depended upon for a livelihood. Wages and employment generally are determined on a day-to-day basis. As there is no true agricultural labor group, social status is determined as much by place of residence as by economic standing.









111

111